

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RECREATIONAL ANGLING TO STATE'S ECONOMY

Presented to the Bay Delta Advisory Council, 7-17-98
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Dear Chairman and Council Members:

My name is John Beuttler and I am here today representing the Fishery Foundation of California to talk with you about the economics of recreational angling, or as it is commonly called, "sportfishing".

No one knows exactly what economic contribution recreational angling makes to the state's economy today because such estimates are not made on an annual basis of this economic activity. Generally speaking, the best source of information we have regarding this contribution is the estimate provided once every five years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The report they publish is called ***the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation***. Their 1996 report estimated that the 37 million angler days adults spent sportfishing generated some \$3.7 billion in direct expenditures and a total economic contribution of \$7 billion to the state's economy. California ranked number one of all the state's in the nation in money generated and in the number of days anglers fished.

As impressive as these numbers may sound, this activity was made by a depressed sportfishing industry which has suffered from the effects of declining fisheries especially in Northern California where many prized fisheries have been listed under State and Federal Endangered Species Acts. Angling success directly affects the amount of future fishing effort and the dollars expended in the market place.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our own back yard. Declines in the estuary's main fisheries - striped bass, salmon, steelhead, American shad and sturgeon - have resulted in several billion dollars of economic activity not being generated over the past thirty years. The most comprehensive economic report on this subject was done for the California Department of Fish and Game in a report they entitled "***Anadromous Fisheries Report #85-03***" which they published and released about a decade ago.

This report found that due to extensive and prolonged declines in the estuary's fisheries, recreational angling activity also declined. As these declines began to

effect fishing success, angling effort also declined slowly at first, but over the decades this resulted in hundreds of millions of angling dollars not being spent on an annual basis. The net effect was that many anglers stopped spending money on trying to catch fish that were no longer available. As a result, some of the sportfishing businesses that depended up anglers fishing for these species also decline.

The striped bass fishery may well provide the best example of how demand for a fishery can decline as the fishing success rate falls. Thirty years ago this fishery was called the **premier fishery** of the estuary. Today it has declined nearly 80% and its population is not self sustaining. Instead of nearly three quarters of a million anglers that fished for striped bass thirty years ago, we find some 300,000 anglers participating today. To varying degrees, the result has been similar for steelhead, shad, sturgeon and salmon fishing.

Another analogy can be found in the data on the number of angling days spent fishing annually. In 1989 anglers spent 58 million angler days fishing in the state. In 1996 that number was reduced to 37 million angler days, representing a decline of 21 million user days. This kind of participation decline has had significant and unmitigated economic impacts on the sportfishing industry.

Since - for the most part - anglers do not fish for economic motives, these fishery declines must also be discussed in other terms. Most of those I know that fish do so because they greatly enjoy the fishing and catching process. When they can not catch fish its rather like trying to go swimming without water; a less than satisfying experience!

They love this sport as well as the resources and the environment that makes it possible. Whether on the ocean, the Bay, in the Delta, or on a river, for these folks fishing helps to make living and working worthwhile. Simply put, fishery declines represent a loss in their quality of life. They cannot simply change their preferences and find another sport! This love of fishing is in their very nature.

Since we have the knowledge and technology to manage our fisheries on a sustainable basis that would encourage angling activity, it is truly most unfortunate when these renewable public resources are allowed to decline. In addition to the issues it raises about the quality of life, these declines represent at the best an inequitable public policy that prevents citizens from exercising their right to fish in the waters of the State as guaranteed by the State Constitution. It also erodes the faith anglers should have in allowing the state to be the trustee of public resources while substantially impacting the State's economy.